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EPA Environmental News

EPA Supports Environmental Justice

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In 1997 a demolition contractor was sent to jail for 15 months and fined \$42,000 for dumping asbestos debris in one of Philadelphia's minority neighborhoods.

In a similar case a Philadelphia commercial property owner went to jail for 30 months and was fined \$30,000 after he hired a minority laborer at \$10 an hour to remove asbestos from his property before selling it. He then hired several friends to help him dump the asbestos debris in an abandoned home in a minority neighborhood.

Both of these cases were aggressively prosecuted by the EPA under the provisions of the Clean Air Act.

No segment of society should become the dumping ground for pollution. Unfortunately, situations like these are all too common and support the charge that minorities and the poor suffer disproportionately from toxic exposures. In the case of asbestos, no amount of exposure is safe because it tends to break into a dust of microscopic fibers that are easily inhaled causing lung cancer, asbestosis and death. And symptoms may not appear until 20 to 40 years after exposure.

The EPA acknowledges that people of color and low income populations suffer more adverse toxic exposures. That their neighborhoods are generally seen as paths of least resistance, and consequently, are more likely to contain polluting facilities or industries.

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Through his executive order issued Feb. 11, 1994 President Clinton addressed this disparity. The order specifically prohibits unequal protection, disparate impact and environmental racism. After the order was signed, the EPA's criminal investigation division immediately created the National Environmental Justice Initiative which ensures that everyone – including minority and low-income populations – enjoys equal benefit and access to environmental protection.

Few current activities will have more impact on future generations than fighting pollution and working to lower environmental risk. To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – preventing pollution that harms one will ultimately protect everyone. Especially our children.

It is estimated that there are 524,008 housing units in Philadelphia contain lead-based paint and 30.7 percent of children tested have dangerously high levels of lead poisoning. This is unacceptable because our fight against lead poisoning is a fight we can win.

The effects of lead poisoning are serious. Children under seven years of age are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning which interferes with the development of the brain and reduce IQ.. High blood levels of lead can cause permanent damage to the nervous system, reduced attention span, hearing loss, stunted growth, headaches, behavioral problems, learning disabilities, sleep disorders and death.

The EPA takes this threat seriously. And we aggressively enforce the lead disclosure rule which requires sellers and landlords of residential housing built before 1978 to disclose to purchasers and tenants the presence of known lead-based paint hazards. To date a total of 19 such actions have been undertaken in the mid-Atlantic region.

Minorities and people living in poverty do not have the same opportunities to move away from unhealthy physical environments. The ability if an individual to escape a health-threatening environment is usually correlated with income. However, racial barriers make it even harder for millions of African Americans to relocate which forces them to remain in polluted environments.

In the City of Chester, for example, which is located in Delaware County, there are four sewage treatment plants. No other municipality in the county has more than one waste treatment facility. Three-fourths of Delaware County's air pollution complaints came from Chester, which is only one of 18 communities in the county.

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Since 1994, the EPA has worked with the state on the Chester Risk Assessment project, studying unknown toxic hazards from interrelated exposures in Chester which has a population of 41,856 residents. The study found that over 60 percent of children's blood samples were unacceptably high for lead and that air emissions from facilities in and around Chester are causing cancer and non-cancer risks. The study also found that the health risk from eating contaminated fish from streams in Chester and the Delaware River is unacceptably high.

Since these findings, a citizens advisory council has been established, the Center for Disease Control has provided money for health screenings, the county has founded a lead education and awareness program and the state has installed an on-site environmental inspector. And VISTA volunteers working with EPA identify pollution sites to be investigated.

Over the past 30 years this nation has made great progress in protecting public health and the environment. We no longer have rivers catching on fire. Toxic pollution from industry has declined. Our air is cleaner. But the job is not done.

We applaud the grassroots activists who have brought the environmental justice movement to the forefront. Community groups all over the country have used the 1986 Community Right to Know Law to find out about the toxic chemicals that are being released into the environment. In one neighborhood chemical companies reduced their toxic releases by 74 percent after the community – armed with information that came directly from the industrial facilities – confronted company officials at the bargaining table.

EPA's mid-Atlantic region, based in Philadelphia, is at the national forefront of environmental justice issues. Beyond Chester, we are attempting to resolve claims of environmental injustice alleged by residents of a chemically contaminated housing project in Virginia and concerns raised by the Native American Mattaponi Tribe in Virginia. Regional Counsel William C. Early is currently heading EPA's Title VI national task force. Reginald Harris is our regional environmental justice coordinator.

The environmental justice movement has made a difference in the lives of people and the physical environment. Working together, community stakeholders assist public decision-makers in identifying at-risk populations, toxic hot spots, research gaps, and create action models to correct existing imbalances and prevent future threats.

We encourage anyone who needs help with an environmental problem to contact EPA's customer hotline at 1-800-438-2474.

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